THE HINDU
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ILLUSTRATION: HITESH SONAR

THE LONGEVITY EDIT

FOREVER IS NOW

The longevity movement, from biohacking, IV therapy, cryotherapy to living in blue zones, is gaining steam around the world. Is India well-equipped for it?

Sanjukta Sharma

There is a rare kind of longevity that looks effortless even in bad air – inside a Mumbai park with unruly grass. Reporting on new directions in geroscience and longevity over the last few years, I met two sanguine centenarians. K.M. Mathappan, 101, who lives with his daughter Mary, 54, a finance professional. And his neighbour and friend, Antony J. Mundane, 104, who lives nearby with his son.

Both grew up in rural Kerala, are well-cared-for, and are regulars at a 7 a.m. laughter club in their neighbourhood park, which is where I first met Mathappan. The former real-estate lawyer and active contributor to church community work, in his 100th year, adducted with surprising ease.

Away from centenarians in busy cities, thriving despite air pollution and ageist mindsets, are the new imaginations and breakthroughs in longevity science – on magnificent display at the 2025 Global Wellness Summit (GWS) held in Dubai in November.

Themed 'Longevity Through a Wellness Lens', the GWS is a feast of ideas and inventions – some real and effective, some wild even to the pathological optimist. The GWS is hosted annually by the New York non-profit Global Wellness Institute (GWI). At the summit, GWI released the Global Economy Monitor, estimating the global wellness industry at $6.8 trillion in 2024 (for India, it was $156 billion). The study projects it to grow by 7.6% annually in the next five years, to an estimated $9.8 trillion in 2029.

As a media delegate, by the end of Day 1, it is obvious to me that longevity wellness is more than tech billionaire Bryan Johnson urging us "not to die", or making biohacking a performative spectacle like he does.

Biohacking, a cornerstone of longevity science, is any incremental change to a human being's body, diet, and lifestyle to improve their health and well-being. Often, illness and tragedy force us to biohack – we have a name for it now. Nine years ago, after a dire cancer diagnosis, two surgeries and chemo-misery as primary treatment, longevity had a very different meaning for me. How best to bring my body and mind back to normal, avoid hospitals, and keep that recurrence at bay. Purposefully, I embraced biohacking – new lifestyle and ways of feeding and nurturing myself. It led me to start The Slow Fix, an IP for a knowledge and awareness platform for preventive health and mindful living.

Immersing myself in the world of longevity as a journalist and cancer survivor has been a way to understand my journey. But this new world of longevity also makes me question why the entire focus is on how to live to 100 and beyond, and not even a little on how well the ill and the terminally ill can live. Palliative longevity, I call it.

Looking for a fix

Today, everything that has a promise to upgrade your body, mind or spirit in some way is a longevity solution – even if that means the lines between hope, belief and scientific data blur. At the summit, when "the father of biohacking" Dave Asprey presented his life story of healing and age-reversal with meditation, wearables and supplements, the thought to pop in my head was: That face isn't botoxed? The 52-year-old author (*Heavily Meditated*, 2025) even displayed his washboard abs as proof of biohacking success.

Elsewhere at the GWS, there are multi-sensory wellness architecture and instances of Artificial Intelligence (AI) diagnostics urging humans to pay heed to what their liver is telling them. The brain solutions are particularly fascinating and movie-like. Sat Randhawa, founder-CEO of One Hype, a brain-mapping technology company, guides me through a wearable they have developed: Brain X360. The helmet with octopus-like tentacles can tell you how tired, aged or foggy your brain is, and offer interventions and treatment strategies. "Imagine this connected to your device, and when your brain is tired, it will automatically blur your screen so you stop scrolling," Randhawa says. Do we need a helmet to tell us when to put a stop to the brain rot?

Enter the blue zones

Longevity evangelists want us to live longer, beyond 80 or 100 (lifespan). And live well (healthspan). We see grandparents resigned to live in their 70s, 80s or 90s without work, with diabetes and bad knees, awaiting death. Now, imagine 80-year-olds earning money, contributing to society, and effortlessly walking pets.

This isn't a far-fetched idea. Blue zones, or geographic areas with lower rates of chronic diseases and longer life expectancy, are expanding around the world. The original five mentioned in Dan Buettner's book *Blue Zones* (2012) are Okinawa (Japan), Sardinia (Italy), Nicoya (Costa Rica), Ikaria (Greece) and Loma Linda (California). Singapore is now considered one, and Oulu (Finland) is expected to be one soon.

Mathappan's Kerala is often considered the Indian Blue Zone due to better health and education infrastructure, but because of lack of accurate birth- and age-related data in large swathes of Indian population, categorising a Blue Zone poses unique challenges in India.

During the pandemic in 2020, Indian marketing-research firm Data Bridge brought out one of the first studies on the longevity economy – estimating it at $15 trillion, projected to grow to $27 trillion by 2030. In May 2025, 'Longevity: A New Way of Understanding Ageing', by Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies, Dalberg and Ashoka, concluded that by 2067, India will have the largest population of older adults in the world. Swetha Totapally, study co-author and regional director for Dalberg Asia-Pacific, says, there's a false perception that "ageing is something we can just deal with later after we've gotten richer as a nation".

Turning back time

Every nation, culture and society has something to say about immortality – *chiranjeevis* like Hanuman in the *Ramayana*, for instance. But as a scientific or self-improvement movement, the pandemic catapulted the names of two bio-scientists and efforts in biosciences into what we now know as the longevity movement. Alex Zhavoronkov and Evelyn Bischof are credited as pioneers for their research on how data and AI can increase lifespan and quality of life. Then came the GLP-1 category of drugs, hyped like a moonshot. Ozempic, the repurposed diabetes drug, is being used for metabolic disorders and clinical obesity, and also as a pre-wedding quick-fix to look thin.Doctors are promising miracles with it, including healthspan extension.

A longevity movement makes sense now because the world over, birth rates are falling and lifespans are increasing. UN and World Health Organization reports say that the number of people aged 60 and over globally will nearly double to around 2.1 billion by 2050. At the same time, birth rates are falling dramatically. In India, in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Delhi, the rates are dropping at nearly double the national rate, according to the latest Sample Registration System (SRS) data. Tamil Nadu's decline (2.35% annually) is steeper than the national average. So, we are moving to a world that will have less youthful curiosity than ever in human history.

The tough Indian market

The most expansive longevity project in India so far is Longevity India, a multi-disciplinary initiative by The Indian Institute of Science (IISc) which introduced its flagship project, BHARAT Study, in 2024. Longevity India convener Dr. Deepak Saini says, "The study is not for the affluent, it is for everyone. However, the affluent will have access earlier. Once the technical challenges are ironed out and the affluent ones 'show' that the approach works, it will be accessible to the masses. Like the mobile phone revolution." Dr. Saini says the need is "India-specific science": building biomarkers, risk scores and health status indicators instead of importing cut-offs and algorithms for high-income Caucasian populations.

The toughest challenge is the Indian mindset that seeks only symptom-addressing healthcare models. Biopeak CEO and co-founder Rishi Pardal says, "Most people engage with healthcare only when something goes wrong. The second challenge is building a collaborative ecosystem for preventive, personalised care."

Personalised longevity consultations in India can cost between ₹10,000 and ₹1 lakh. New-age wellness centres are mushrooming, with IV therapies and other biohacking mechanisms like cryotherapy and hyperbaric oxygen chambers. In Mumbai, an IV drip of NAD, a crucial co-enzyme found in all living cells, essential for metabolism, energy production, DNA repair, and gene regulation, costs between ₹30,000 and ₹50,000.

In August 2025, Swiss-headquartered hospitality chain Aman Resorts introduced the Longevity Pathways programme curated by the group's wellness advisor, tennis champion Novak Djokovic – a longevity-era poster boy. At their Rajasthan property, Amanbagh, the programme's detox protocol includes Ayurvedic treatments like Shirodhara, vegan dishes with source-investigated ingredients, hatha yoga, pranayama, and fire meditation. The resort's in-house Ayurveda expert tells me, the programme channels what Ayurveda means – knowledge of longevity. After three days minus noise and stimulus, I return with sharper focus and a feeling of lightness, which the Mumbai grind quickly eroded and I was back to my basic biohacking ways.

Goal of modern healthcare

Private healthcare is also taking baby steps. Mumbai's Sir H.N. Reliance Foundation Hospital recently launched its Centre for Well-being and Longevity. Dr. Mukesh Thakur, director of Internal Medicine, Acute Medicine and Clinical Transformation, says, lifestyle-related chronic illnesses are appearing far earlier in Indians – often in their 30s and 40s – compared to Western populations where they typically manifest a decade or two later. Emphasising early detection and root-cause treatment, Dr. Thakur says, extending healthspan – not just lifespan – must be the central goal of modern healthcare.

The real longevity intervention for millions is not biohacking but managing the triple burden of earning money, battling a disease through robust, accessible public health systems and basic elderly care, says Dr. Srinivas Goli, associate professor at International Institute of Population Sciences, Mumbai. He adds, "India is critically unprepared." For a country ill-equipped with even the basics of public health, the primary tenets of preventive healthcare will likely make the biggest impact.

The friendly centenarian Mathappan eats home-cooked meals; his tensile muscles are from rowing since childhood in rural Kerala. And he often steps out to meet people or just to shoot the breeze. He embodies what longevity, in a practical sense, can be at this moment in human evolution – the idea of living fully and meaningfully.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and founder of The Slow Fix (@the_slow_fix).

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Dividend, not burden

The consensus among economists studying longevity, including Prof. Andrew Scott, an authority on longevity through the lens of public policy and economics, and author of *The Longevity Imperative* (2025), is that if a nation wants longevity dividend, and not longevity burden, it must redesign its savings, retirement and AgeTech frameworks now.

Call of gravity

Food-delivery service Zomato founder Deepinder Goyal, whose latest venture is a longevity company, called Limber Life Sciences, recently announced 'Continue', an open-source longevity-research project aimed at decoding the science behind human ageing, exploring how environment, molecular changes — and believe it or not, gravity! — shape how long we live.

COURTESY GWS

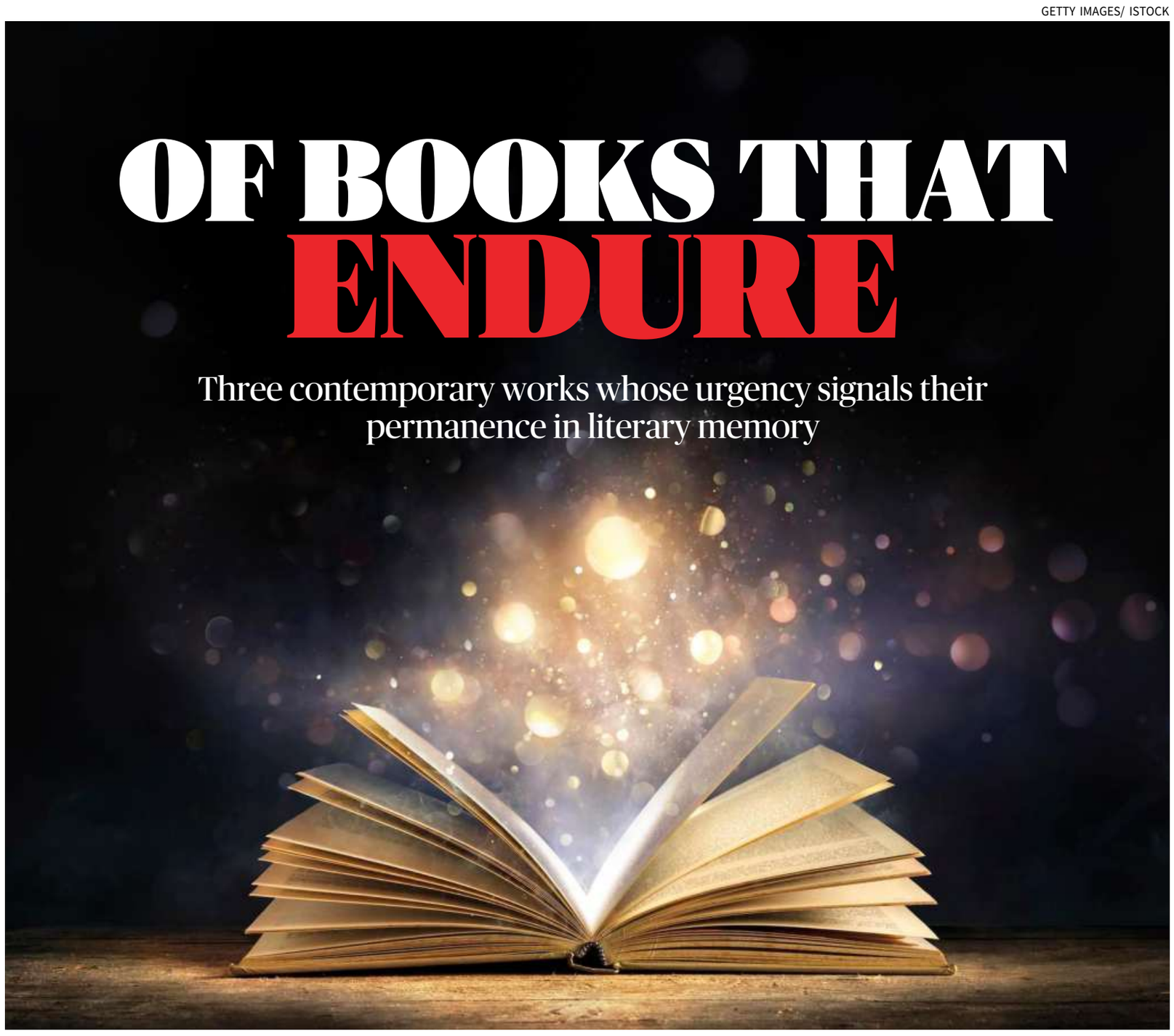
Most people engage with healthcare only when something goes wrong...These models work effectively only when diagnostics, specialists and therapies come together around the individual

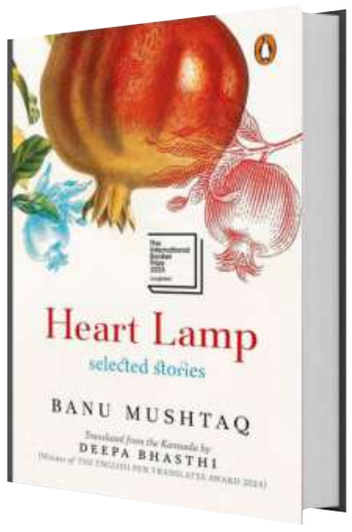
RISHI PARDAL
Co-founder and CEO, Biopeak

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

OF BOOKS THAT ENDURE

Three contemporary works whose urgency signals their permanence in literary memory





Speaking truth to power

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

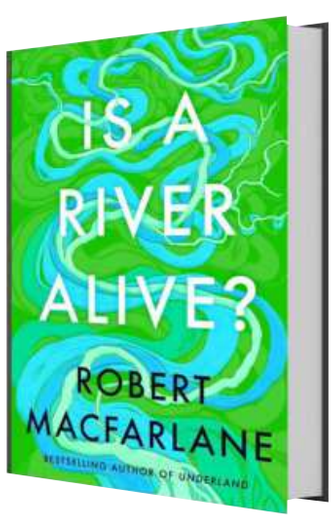
Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* is a classic that will endure even after decades. This English translation by Deepa Bhasthi of select short stories by Mushtaq was awarded the International Booker Prize this year. *Heart Lamp* is not only the first translation from Kannada, but also the first short story collection ever, to win this award. The recognition has given a global platform to Mushtaq's powerful and humane prose.

The stories describe with warmth and humanity the everyday lives of Muslim women in south Karnataka. The language is colloquial and full of feeling, containing desire, ambition, the joys and sorrows of children, the implacable force of family. While rooted in its specific social setting, Mushtaq's writing is universal and speaks against injustice. Fiction is only one dimension of her commitment to positive social change. In her life as a journalist, activist, lawyer, municipal council member, and convenor of the Bandaya (protest) literary movement, Mushtaq has always demonstrated a belief in thoughtful, constructive, and empathetic action.

Heart Lamp is rich, textured, and profoundly affecting. The stories are brilliant with imagery even as they speak truth to power. They give voice to those who are rarely heard: older women, poor relatives, those at the margins. The elderly, the weak, the forgotten. When they do speak, it is with powerful simplicity; occasionally, with flashes of defiance. In a brief but illuminating exchange, in a tiny village of less than a hundred homes, an elderly tailor challenges a grandmother with a question that reaches across the entire universe: "Do you know, Jamaal Bi, why this whole world, the sun, the moon, the sky and stars have been created?" The senior lady rebukes him: "Philosophy is not your exclusive property." This moment recalls William Blake's image of seeing the world in a grain of sand.

As Mushtaq said in her Booker acceptance speech, "No story is ever small... in the tapestry of human experience, every thread holds the weight of the whole."

The writer is in the IAS.



Where the water flows

Bijal Vachharajani

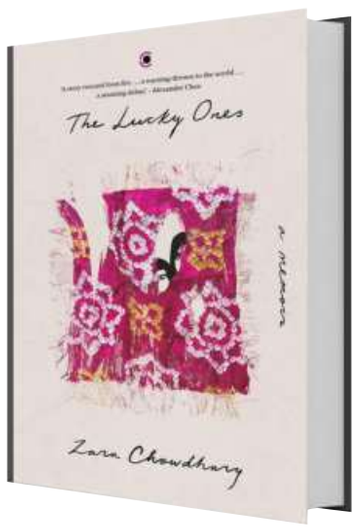
As the year 2025 came to an end, I stood listening to the Kunthipuzha River as she made her way across the heart of Kerala's Silent Valley National Park, and thought about the many people who have protected it for decades, and that's when Robert Macfarlane's *Is A River Alive?* came to my mind.

"Our fate flows with that of the river – and always has," he writes in what is, perhaps, one of his most personal books yet. It's the book I have kept by my writing desk, not only because it's beautifully written and produced with the most stunning end papers, but because it's a story I keep returning to.

The author embarks upon three journeys – to Ecuador, India, and Canada – bookended by a homecoming to his local chalk stream in Cambridge in the U.K. The prose crackles, as alive as the rivers he meets. Macfarlane paints a vivid and respectful picture of water people, as well as the spaces where these awe-inspiring waterbodies dwell, while underscoring the socio-political landscape that attempts to bend these rivers.

These riverine stories are not limited to their geographies, the narratives resonate across the planet, championing life-giving waterbodies everywhere.

The writer is a children's book author and editor.



The slow unravelling

Sumana Mukherjee

Back when I read it in July, I was fairly certain I wouldn't come across a braver or more heartbreaking book in 2025. And I was right. Zara Chowdhary's memoir *The Lucky Ones* was published a whole year before I read it but its urgency and relevance only grew in that period – as I believe it will continue to, as the world grapples with unchecked majoritarianism.

The Lucky Ones is one of a handful of books on the Gujarat riots of 2002, but stands apart in its framing through the lens of a Muslim family as it slowly unravels in the run-up to, during, and in the aftermath of the violence. Startlingly well-written for a debut work, intimate, bold, unapologetic and deeply empathetic, *The Lucky Ones* makes us remember that which too many want to forget.

The writer and editor is based in Bengaluru.

IN CONVERSATION

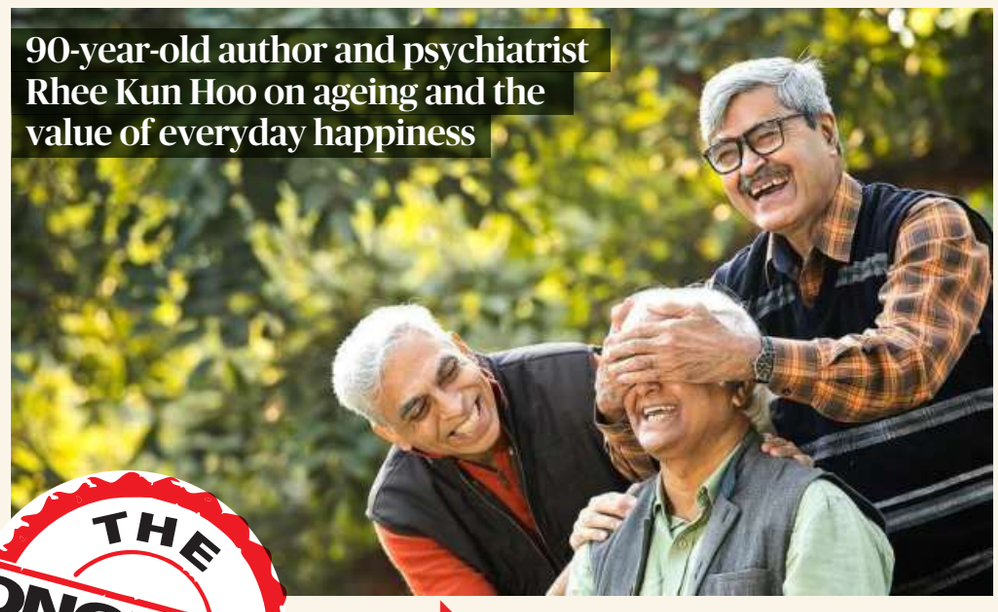
A Korean master's guide to a happy life

90-year-old author and psychiatrist Rhee Kun Hoo on ageing and the value of everyday happiness

Neha Mehrotra

Happiness, believes South Korean author Rhee Kun Hoo, is a choice; hence the name of his latest book *If You Live To 100, You Might As Well Be Happy* (Penguin Random House, 2024). The 90-year-old psychiatrist-turned-writer has actually led a really hard life: he has seen wars (World War II and the Korean War), typhoid, poverty, bankruptcy and even faced prison. In his early 20s, Hoo was jailed for 10 months for his role in the pro-democracy protests against the autocratic rule of Syngman Rhee, South Korea's first president. But, despite everything, he's slowly but surely lived and thrived through it all.

For a large portion of his life, Rhee worked as a psychiatrist in hospitals and mental asylums across the country, reforming the mental health ecosystem from the ground up. Somewhere along the way, he also got married, raised four children, and now, a score of grandchildren, with whom he lives in a communal building in Seoul. In some ways, he's the perfect person to talk about a long happy life. In his book (translated by Suphil Lee Park), Rhee writes of the often-overlooked value of ageing, sharing his wisdom and philosophy for a life well-lived, exploring forgiveness, perseverance and simple everyday joys. Edited excerpts from an interview:



Happiness is an abstract concept, or an invention, says Rhee Kun Hoo (below, right). (GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Question: *You started writing books in your 70s and became a bestselling author. How did you get into writing late in life?*
Answer: I've always been interested in writing. Back in college, I was part of poetry clubs. But I only started writing in earnest during my psychiatric residency; back then, South Korea was still significantly under-informed about the neurodiverse, or family planning, or sex education. My mentor encouraged me to write academic papers related to these topics. Later, I focused on translating psychiatric theories into more accessible language for the general public, which now amounts to around 15 books.

In 2013, Galleon Publishing, a renowned publisher in Korea, asked me to write a book on a specific theme, leading to *I Want to Have Fun Till the Day I Die*. After this book became a bestseller, I received many invitations to give lectures or contribute pieces of writing. And so, my writing career began.

For my latest, I have written more about how people can plan for their second act in life, which happens to align well with public interest at the moment. Most of what I write is based on my experiences, theories I've learnt, and observations from treating psychiatric patients. I consider myself a psychiatrist first and foremost, and I simply respond to my readers, who want more of my insights on these subjects.

Q: *Do you think there's a dearth of happiness in today's world?*
A: I don't believe that a lack of happiness, or unhappiness, is more prevalent per se. If we don't strive to live above our means when it's out of reach and accept ourselves, we can always find opportunities to enjoy our lives under most circumstances. People often claim they have no chance at happiness when they are simply unable to let go of unattainable goals and desires. It is frustration and dissatisfaction, not unhappiness, strictly speaking. You can always get rid of a source of dissatisfaction, because it usually involves a direct object or state that you can disengage with.

Q: *You mention in the book that you try to find joy and fun in the mundane. Can you give a few instances of that from your daily life?*
A: Happiness is an abstract concept, which is to say, an invention. It's not that it doesn't exist, but some might not feel it the way they expect. The key is to understand your own abilities and limits and to let go of troubling desires.

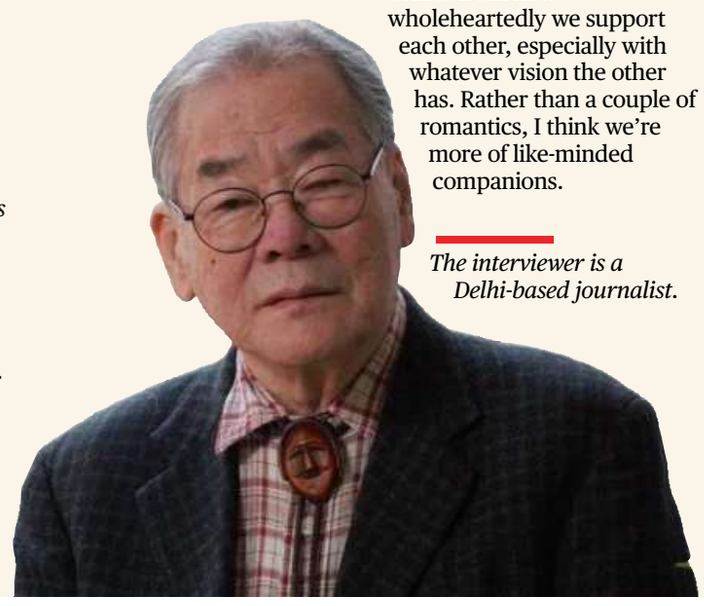
For instance, a friend of mine always feels dissatisfied because he buys entire collections of books at once and can't finish them. I advised him to start with a single, shorter book to experience the satisfaction of completion – to disentangle himself from the repeated situation he puts himself in that leaves him dissatisfied. And once this source of dissatisfaction is removed, you can reach a state of satisfaction, which then gradually leads to greater achievements and a greater sense of joy over time.

Q: *You talk about how you started writing emails to your grandchildren. Would you recommend that to other parents and grandparents?*
A: In the past, elders were seen as mentors, but in today's rapidly changing world, younger people often adapt more easily and quickly. Which is to say, it has become essential for us, the older generations, to understand younger generations' lifestyles and values.

When we started living together as a family, we assumed we might see each other every day, but with everyone having jobs and schoolwork to do, our time together is limited. We have family gatherings twice a year, in the spring and fall, and we take turns hosting family dinners on the weekends. However, even when we don't meet, we talk to each other regularly via email. Even in the same villa, email is a convenient way to stay in touch. Not many families find themselves in close proximity; if my family and I, living under the same roof, still find emails and texts to be reliable ways of communication, why not leverage modern technology when you don't live near?

Not many families find themselves in close proximity; if my family and I, living under the same roof, still find emails and texts to be reliable ways of communication, why not leverage modern technology when you don't live near?

Q: *In the book, you talk about how you wooed your wife, and your life as a couple thereafter. Would you say you're a romantic?*
A: Ha ha, I'm not sure if I can call myself a romantic. My wife and I met as children, so for a while, we saw each other as siblings of sorts, and it took a long time for romantic feelings to develop. The real strength of our relationship, I believe, comes from how wholeheartedly we support each other, especially with whatever vision the other has. Rather than a couple of romantics, I think we're more of like-minded companions.



The interviewer is a Delhi-based journalist.

AFP

Fever pitch

Sandeep Menon highlights ignored football personalities in this people's history of a sport

Suresh Menon

When I began my career – as a football writer – it soon became clear that while cricket was more popular at the international level, football's local leagues around the country attracted larger crowds. Football continues to be a game of contradictions, often ignored at the highest level, but followed with a passion that has led to riots and even death below that.

The 1982 World Cup, the first to be telecast live in India, saw a drop in attendances as fans realised local heroes didn't measure up to the Rossis, Zicos and Falcaos of that tournament. Over the years, the audience for the European leagues evolved separately from those who followed Indian football, creating hierarchies in a classless sport.

Hat-trick sans crowds

India is currently ranked 142nd in the world. For those who calculate success through championships played and trophies won, that suggests a depressing lack of success. When India's star Sunil Chhetri scored a hat-trick at the Intercontinental Cup recently, he did so in an empty stadium.

He then took to social media with a plea: "To all of you who don't have any hope in Indian football, we request you to come to the stadium. It's not fun to abuse on internet. Come to the stadium, do it to our faces, scream at us, shout at us, abuse us, who knows one day we might change you guys, you might start cheering for us."

It worked. The stadium was packed for the next match.

An old message was thus reinforced: football has never lacked mass appeal. The mass game across the nurseries of football in India in Sandeep Menon's delightful *Sacred Grounds*: *A Journey Through People's Football in India* shows why. Ranking doesn't matter, and there is almost a purity to the fan experience because football in its various avatars – khep, 7s, black, basti – is built into the fabric of India's towns. People are too busy playing it, supporting it, deriving social, cultural and political benefits from it to worry about the big picture. "A football field is just a patch of land until people give it meaning," writes Menon, "Football (is) not alive because of a few famous clubs but because of the people…"

The Kerala story

The passion reflects the diverse temperaments of the people too. In Kerala, the 7s Association ensures that a quarter of all profits go to charity. "The local clubs are both allies and critics of the authorities," says Menon, "forming a support system as well as demanding developmental activities for general social well-being."

Many consider Lionel Messi, like they do Gabriel Garcia Marquez, intimate if non-personal, friends. When Argentina won the World Cup in 2022, they thanked Kerala for their support!

Bengaluru has "black" tournaments which are not sanctioned by the state football association. Gowthamapura, or 'mini-Brazil', has a statue of Pele alongside those of Mother Teresa and Dr. Ambedkar.

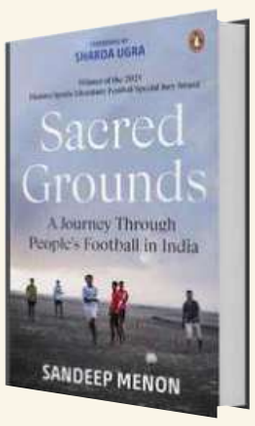
The scale of tournaments and public support for football that exists below the radar is impressive, even inspiring. It is a strength of the book that these are described with remarkable intimacy. Menon has been there, done that, and wants to share the excitement.

There are over 20,000 unregistered football tournaments in Bengal every year, and nearly all of them have a connection with political parties.

Many internationals across the country began their careers with 7s (like the brilliant I.M. Vijayan) or one of the unsanctioned tournaments.

Others, not known beyond their area of operation, remain heroes but within a small circle. Like Chennai's P. Nagesh, "who embodied the local culture. His football was pure and joyful, uninhibited by tactics and statistics. He played with a reckless abandon, banking on his skill to entertain the crowd."

From Nagaland came T. Ao, independent India's first Olympics captain in 1948. Indians played



Sacred Grounds: A Journey Through People's Football in India
Sandeep Menon
Penguin Play
₹499

barefoot, and Ao famously claimed to play "football, not bootball." Ao is among a host of internationals who fill the book with their local exploits, brought alive here by the passion and research of the author. All sporting stories are a mix of hard facts, almost-true incidents, myths, folklore and anecdotes that speak to the larger truth. While colouring these in different shades, Menon takes us on a marvellous journey with ignored personalities and overlooked events in this people's history of a sport.

A 'fish' derby

The 'fish' derby in Kolkata, for example, is well-known. Prawns go with Mohun Bagan, while hilsa is the choice of East Bengal, the price of these rising sharply on match days. Less known is the linguistic impact of football in Kerala.

The author reminds us that there is more than one facet to a sport, that success in football means different things to different people, that in a country as large as India, the sport is a monument to unity in diversity. Read this if you love sport, and especially if you don't.

The reviewer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?

KEELADI, A SANGAM LABORATORY

Sowmiya Ashok couches the glory of a 2,600-year-old past within the larger political and emerging cultural tensions of India

Ramya Kannan
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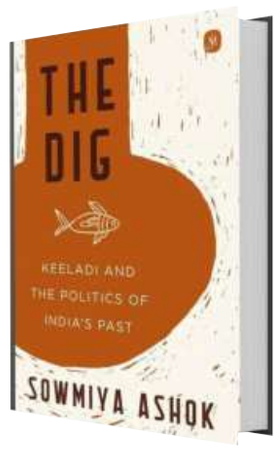
It is fascinating how mere dirt can yield such greatness; empires rise from the mud, dwarfing the grandiloquence of the present, sufficient to humble the human race. Naturally, the disruption of the ground beneath our feet is likely to cause upheavals. Just as the digs at Keeladi have done.

The revelations from Keeladi are awe-inspiring, whether one is inclined to study the past or not. In the maelstrom of what the past has come to mean, however, it has quickly morphed to become the launch pad of language, cultural and racial chauvinism.

Invading lives

Sowmiya Ashok's *The Dig* attempts to do justice not only to a past that's over 2,600 years ago, but importantly couch the glory of Keeladi's treasures within the larger political and emerging cultural tensions of India. "Suddenly Keeladi was everywhere," she says, reflecting what most Tamils living in the State discovered. Keeladi invaded lives; in the minds of Tamils, it was the equivalent of discovering the Indus Valley Civilisation, or King Tut's intact tomb in Egypt – history-altering in a cataclysmic sort of way.

However, the story is not the easiest to tell. The glory often arrives belatedly on the back of carbon dating reports; initially,



The Dig: Keeladi and the Politics of India's Past
Sowmiya Ashok
John Murray/Hachette India
₹799

there is merely hope and a prayer on the lips of archaeologists working at the digs, besides some systematic scratching at the dirt.

The Beta Analytic Lab in Miami, Florida, where the samples were sent for carbon dating, found that the cultural deposits unearthed during the fourth excavation at Keeladi in Sivaganga district could be safely dated to a period in 6th century BCE, thereby pushing Keeladi back by about 300 years earlier than was first believed.

After this, as Ashok says, "Everyone was certain that Keeladi was precious. It was a purely Sangam site, offering tangible proof of the advanced thinking of the people of the Sangam Age. Keeladi became a Sangam laboratory where archaeologists and epigraphists seemed to feed verses into the trenches and evidence emerged in physical form." Phrases like these could well be the modern-day version of a verse from the *Purananuru* poems of Sangam literature – succinct and revelatory.

As the trenches deepen and locals gain familiarity with several tools of the archaeologists' trade, it became increasingly clear that "Keeladi showed similarities to Harappan sites: graffiti marks scratched on to pots, comparable urban planning features, bangles made of conch shells and more."

Nearly a decade ago, the media realised Keeladi was the literal pot of gold, and began writing, chronicling furiously every piece of pottery shard, every urn, every carnelian bead to turn up. Since archaeology has come to stand for power and politics, the major historical discovery at Keeladi automatically got swept up in a tornado of action, claims and counter-claims of sovereignty.

The swirl it has been since caught up in defies clarity, but the author has a go anyway, trying to separate the tendrils that have curled around language pride, emerged as a counter to hegemonic forces, and to see this site for the staggering historic value it embeds.

An advanced civilisation that lasted for nearly 800 years, dating as far back as the 6th century BCE, can actually be more than the sum of its parts.

People at the dig

The Dig is in part also about the people at the dig – the archaeologists, including the most controversial one among them all, Amarnath Ramakrishna; the people who dig and scrape the dirt off the pottery shards, the people who extract DNA from the cochlear bone of ancient skeletons, people who do video tours, and historians who make podcasts, those who read the Tamil Brahmi and *vatteluttu* scripts. Ultimately, every dig is as much about the living, as it is about the dead who call out to them. Ashok's easy familiarity with these people brings a sense of the living into the book, and crucially, a sense of what Keeladi means to Tamils.

It is through these interactions she records so meticulously that we learn of the tussle with the Archaeological Survey of India, how assertions by an archaeologist brought down the Babri Masjid and theories galore about Aryan invasion.

We also learn about archaeologists cosying up to the ruling dispensation, all interspersed with a running thread of small talk that parses grand claims against the opinions of people she encounters. She knocks back some of the chest thumping with quotes from people who champion a sedate study of history, and as Keeladi becomes overshadowed by interpretations, she sets out to separate the wheat from the chaff.

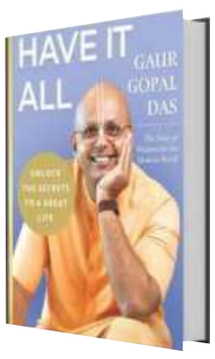
Through this companionable pilgrimage emerges an intimate picture of the shrine of Keeladi, warranting pride in identity. At the same time, it remains juxtaposed against a holistic acknowledgement of diversity and the wonderful melting pot that is India.

Workers at the Keeladi excavation site in Sivaganga, Tamil Nadu; and (top) an artefact from the site. (R. ASHOK)

BROWSER: THE LONGEVITY EDIT

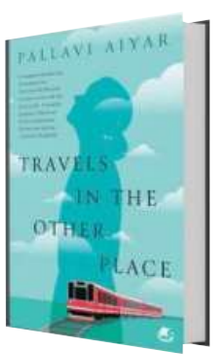
The Longevity Code
Sophia Pathai, Pullela Gopichand
Ebury Press
₹699
Health, fitness and practising the principles of healthy longevity have always been badminton ace P. Gopichand's passions. He teams up with Dr. Pathai, an expert in longevity medicine, and they write about how people may achieve optimal health by combining scientific research and practical advice.

You Can Have It All
Gaur Gopal Das
HarperCollins
₹599
Inspired by real stories, Gaur Gopal Das brings together 10 principles he hopes will guide readers on their journey of self-discovery. In his author's note, the monk writes that if people are overwhelmed, they should seek professional help, because asking for help is a sign of wisdom and self-care.



Eight Million Ways to Happiness
Hiroko Yoda
Bloomsbury
₹599
Following grief and loss, Hiroko Yoda turned to Shinto, Buddhism, Shugendo and beyond to cope with her sadness. Filled with life lessons, Hiroko writes about her experiences as she trains as a Shinto shrine-dancer, climbs mountains with Shugendo ascetics and meets one of Japan's last living 'itako', a traditional mystic.

Travels in the Other Place
Pallavi Aiyar
Tranquebar
₹599
Intrepid writer and journalist Pallavi Aiyar's book is a series of travelogues "knitted around universal milestones", like illness. She moved from India to China, Europe to Japan, and writes that travelling well is "a practice in gratitude for the journey, sharpened by the knowledge that it is finite."



THE LONGEVITY EDIT

These nonagenarians share their secrets to a fulfilling life and indefatigable spirit

LIFE AFTER 90

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

‘Stay current, drop your frowns’

DR. SNEH BHARGAVA | 95

Doctor, former director & Professor Emeritus of AIIMS, New Delhi

Soma Basu

Last year, during the release of her debut book, *The Woman Who Ran AIIMS*, the 95-year-old Dr. Sneh Bhargava sat for an hour-long interview without a trace of fatigue or even a sip of water. “Don’t worry, I love interacting with people,” she kept saying with a smile.

Dr. Bhargava is the first and the only woman director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. Appointed by the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, she took charge on October 31, 1984, the day Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated.

The nonagenarian tenaciously resists stereotypes. She lives by herself in Delhi (her daughter stays nearby) but does not confine herself to a life of solitude.

“Every Saturday, you will find me at AIIMS discussing difficult cases with the resident doctors. Twice a week, I am at Sitaram Bhartia Institute of Science and Research, for CME (continuing medical education) classes and to spend time with my friends in the doctor’s lounge, gossiping over *chai*,” she says.

Enjoying a good life has always been high on her agenda, says Dr. Bhargava. “It’s a blessing to live long and healthy; I have everything I could have wished for – an extremely satisfying work life, lovely family, wonderful friends. I wake up each morning with a smile and lead my life with gratitude,” she adds.

Her ingrained optimism is one of her greatest qualities. “I keep myself active, reading, solving sudoku and crossword puzzles. From any project to a party, the words ‘*not possible*’ do not exist in my dictionary,” she says.

Though the Delhi winter, pollution, and sarcopenia (progressive loss of skeletal muscle mass) are testing, this doctor is not one to be bogged down. Guided by a physiotherapist, she exercises daily for 30 minutes to strengthen her core muscles. She eats fresh and on time. “I’m conscious of nutritious food; I have fresh juices, veggies; *dal* and eggs for protein.”

Her boundless excitement for life is visible in her style. “I love to dress for the weather,” she says, showing her favourite colourful summery *kaftans*. “Winterwear is usually trousers, pullover, and a long overcoat,” she says, not forgetting to mention her platform heels and a dash of lipstick.

“Stay current, drop your frowns and negativity, and keep your sense of humour,” she advocates.

The writer is a senior journalist based in Delhi.

‘I will play as long as I live’

BHAGWANI DEVI DAGAR | 98

World-champion athlete, Najafgarh, New Delhi

TAYYAB HUSSAIN S.M.

Ashok Kumar

Ahead of her 98th birthday on January 1, Bhagwani Devi Dagar sat in her living room, in a vibrant pink tracksuit and woollen beanie. “I have won all the medals at home and in the world,” the nonagenarian athlete says with pride. “*Jab tak jiyungi, tab tak khelungi* (I will play as long as I live).”

On spotting the camera, her eyes sparkle, she corrects her posture and playfully urges the cameraman to “take good pictures”.

The Delhi (Najafgarh) resident holds a national record in the 100m sprint, clocking 24.74 seconds, winning a gold at the 2022 World Masters Athletics Championships in Finland at age 94. In July 2023, she made it to the Guinness World Records as the oldest competitive shot-putter (female), at 95 years and 185 days. Her age was verified on *India’s Got Talent* reality TV show, in which she appeared after winning gold at the World Masters Athletics Indoor Championship in Poland in April 2023.

Hailing from Haryana, ‘Champion Dadi’ attributes her robust health to a rustic regimen. “In my formative years, I partook liberally of the rich ghee and milk my father’s buffaloes yielded,” she recalls.

Unaided, she ascends and descends the stairs to her room on the first floor; and walks a few kilometres daily. “A glass of milk twice daily” is the secret to her vitality, she confides.

Widowed at 30, she single-handedly raised her now-retired son, who was employed at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Hardships fuelled her resolve to live.

Long before her grandson Vikas Dagar, a para athlete with an impressive tally of 24 international and national medals, introduced her to the world of sports in 2022, Bhagwani Devi underwent a major open-heart bypass surgery in 2007. Two years ago, she underwent an angioplasty. In 2023, at the 22nd Asian Masters Athletics Championship in the Philippines, though she walked to the ground with a stick, she won three golds.

Sports has given her life a purpose, her grandson notes, adding that she is quite social for her age. During the day, she spends time with her great grandchildren and in the evenings she hangs out with the neighbourhood women. She has a couple of friends, all younger to her. Last month, she visited the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and was also seen dancing at a family wedding. “For her, life is a celebration and her philosophy is to live in the present,” says Vikas.

‘The heart should be pure’

KRISHNAMMAL JAGANNATHAN | 99

Gandhian social activist, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

Akila Kannadasan

MOHAN TANISK

Krishnammal Jagannathan is reading on a quiet afternoon in the workers’ home adjacent to Gandhigram Rural Institute in Dindigul. On days such as these, when the wind makes the millet fields nearby hiss, the 99-year-old Gandhian thinks of the people closest to her heart: her mother Nagammal, social reformer Dr. T.S. Soundaram Ramachandran, and non-violence and human rights advocate Vinoba Bhave.

Social activism has kept her physically and emotionally healthy. She walked the length and breadth of India with Bhave as a part of the Bhoodan Movement; fought for land and dignity of landless Dalit women labourers as the co-founder of NGO Land for Tillers’ Freedom (LAFTI); worked on the field at Keezhvenmani after the 1968 massacre of 44 Dalit men, women, and children.

In her now-shaky but resonant voice, she shares her life story. Her daughter Dr. Sathya Jagannathan, a paediatrician at Gandhigram Institute of Rural Health, condenses it for us. “When I wake up at 4 a.m. every day, I look at the morning star in the sky. I would think of it as a lamp lit by the universe, and pray to it to guide me through the day,” says Krishnammal. She attributes her calm state of mind to this practice.

She and her late Gandhian and social activist husband Sankaralingam Jagannathan would start the day at 4 a.m., spin the *charkha* for an hour or two, followed by prayers. She says, “Prayer, the spinning wheel, and love for fellow human beings have been my guiding philosophy.”

Krishnammal still draws strength from her social-work experiences as a schoolgirl under Dr. Soundaram, rescuing house-imprisoned widowed girls to give them education and a shot at a better life.

She has never stopped working since; fighting for someone or the other. Which is perhaps why, as she approaches 100, her mind is all the more razor-sharp.

Memories nourish Krishnammal. She rarely forgets; her mind often replays some of her best days. For instance, the three days she spent as a student serving Mahatma Gandhi at The American College in Madurai, where she got to hold his hand; and the day she made *dosas* for Martin Luther King Jr. when he visited Gandhigram. For a long, happy life, keep harsh thoughts at bay, she says, “The heart should be pure at all times.”

ASHNA BUTANI

‘Happy because I have no debt’

RAJENDRA PRASAD | 90

Businessman, New Delhi

Ashna Butani

On his 90th birthday on January 1, Rajendra Prasad shared a pizza with his great-grandchildren. The Delhi-based businessman doesn’t deprive himself of an indulgence on special occasions; and the occasional *namkeen* or *samosa*. The rest of the year, he is committed to his soup, vegetables, and evening snack – an apple.

The man of few words says, “I go to my office in the afternoons out of habit. I’ve been going to the office for 63 years.” His wife and son concur that staying busy keeps him emotionally and physically healthy.

Every now and then, he takes a trip down memory lane. His otherwise shaky voice amps up when he speaks about his coin collection. It comprises coins from a 1972 Europe trip, to an *anna* – used as a currency unit in British India – that would buy him a plate of *poori sabzi* or a film ticket back in the day, he recalls.

“I would save up two *annas* for the first-day, first-show of Raj Kapoor’s and Madhubala’s films,” he says, while his wife and son chime in to say that films like *Awara* (1951) and *Sangam* (1964) are still played at home.

When asked if he is happy with the life that he has lived, he laughs and says, “I am happy because I have no debt.” He advises younger generations, “Plan your finances, spend wisely, because old age is full of surprises.”

One of the hardest things about entering his 90s is the absence of many of his close friends, who have passed away. But his family keeps him engaged, he says, with a smile. “When my great-grandchildren come over, we watch cricket together.” It’s the little things that keep him going.

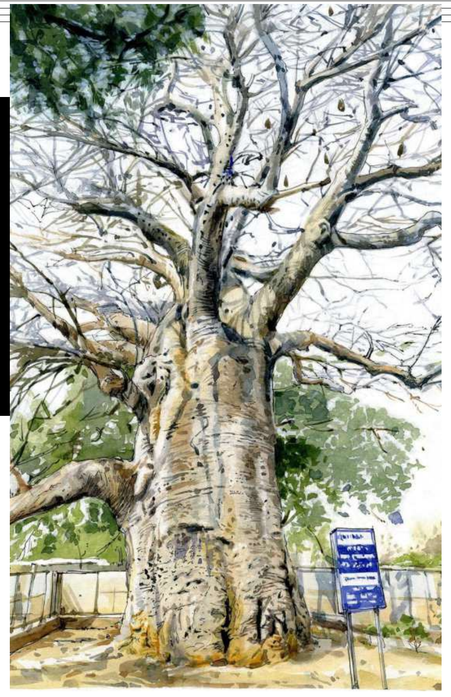
GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

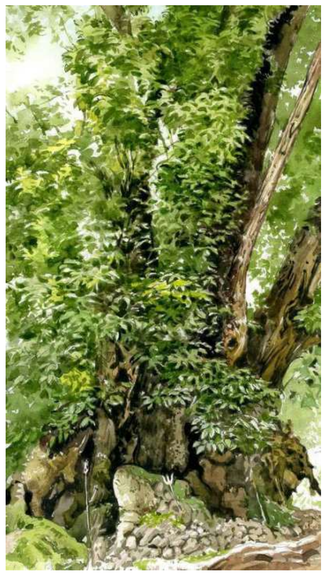
WHAT'S YOUR WISH FOR THE NEW YEAR?
THE NEW YEAR?! ISN'T IT ONLY JUNE NOW?
L.O.C
JANUARY FEELS LIKE JUNE BECAUSE OUR GLACIERS ARE DISAPPEARING, DISRUPTING EVERYTHING— SNOWFALL, FLOWERING OF MEADOWS, POLLINATION, ANIMAL MOVEMENT, CROP CYCLES AND HUMAN LIVELIHOOD.
L.O.C
WELL, THEN. MY WISH FOR THE NEW YEAR IS THAT INDIA WILL BE ABLE TO ABROGATE GLACIAL MELT, AND NOT JUST CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS.
L.O.C
AND MINE THAT PAKISTAN WILL BRING IN CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS TO SECURE GLACIERS, AND NOT JUST THE FIELD MARSHAL.
L.O.C

SPEAK FOR THE TREES

As cities rush ahead, India’s old-growth trees slow time and record centuries of survival. But are we protecting them?



(Clockwise from left) Three baobabs of Savanur; the Dodda Sampige of Biligiri Rangan Hills; Kannimara, the pride of Parambikulam. (COURTESY *ICONIC TREES OF INDIA* BY S. NATESH, ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAGAR BHOWMICK, ROLI BOOKS)



Sunil Rajagopal

Time in a city is a blur. Things change, and we often don’t notice.

Nothing changes, and we don’t realise it. That is why I try to live near trees. They keep time and are never in a hurry about it. It is winter in Chennai, and the Siris are dropping their leaves. Soon, one can gaze up at the sky through their profusely branching arms, abandoned nests, and barren twigs. The trunk splits into branches and those into smaller ones; infinitely dividing themselves without ever losing proportion. *Every broken branch is the tree in miniature.*

Nature’s designs are full of such rhythmic, repetitive patterns called fractals – complicated mathematical models built from simple repeated shapes diminishing in size every time they are repeated. And, perhaps, fractals are not just spatial but temporal as well. What if time were not the relentlessly ticking, linear movement we think it to be, but a 4D block where the past, present, and future co-exist? That is pretty much what long-lived trees do.

They stand as silent witnesses to the passage of time, but on their own terms. Operating on principles beyond our frazzled timescales through mathematical patterns like the golden ratio. Measuring time as a physical record through seasons and growth rings, and slow conversations through root and fungal networks. Slowness, a virtue and strategy.

Of gods and descendants

India is full of old-growth trees, and the longest-lived ones often are spiritually significant. For long, it was thought that there were no trees in India that were more than a thousand years old, but that may be changing now.

You have the usual suspects, the figs. Many are Banyans (*Ficus benghalensis*), bustling and brooding mini-worlds of their own, spreading over acres in different parts of the country and living up to 500 years. Including the great Banyan of the Theosophical society in Chennai that once covered nearly 40,000 sq. ft. Then there are its cousins, the Peepals (*Ficus religiosa*). Like the Bodhi at Gaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment. The present tree is *only* around 145 years old, but traces its direct lineage back to over 2,500 years, with descendants spreading across the world.

In the high Himalayas, the magnificent Himalayan Cedars (*Cedrus deodara*) live up to their name as the trees of the gods. A particular specimen in the arid zone of Lahaul in Himachal Pradesh has been reported to be more than 1,500 years old. Two particularly large specimens growing near a cluster of Shiva temples in Jageshwar in Uttarakhand are believed to be older than 900 years each. The related Shurs or Himalayan Pencil Cedars (*Juniperus polycarpos*) are also very long-lived, with many individuals growing in remote high-altitude regions believed to be more than 1,000 years old as well.

From Ethiopian warlords

Further south in the Western Ghats is another millennia-old denizen. The Soligas of the Biligiriranga (aka BR) Hills, in southern Karnataka, centre their world and spiritual lives around the Dodda Sampige, an enormous and venerable *Michelia champaca* (reclassified as *Magnolia champaca*) tree. The tree has a trunk that is more than 22 metres across. Meanwhile, the massive Kannimara Teak (*Tectona grandis*) of Parambikulam Tiger Reserve towering at nearly 45 metres is only about 500 years old. Less is known about the greybeards in the east. A Bakhor Bengena (Divine Jasmine, *Tamilnadia uliginosa*), a small flowering tree in Sivasagar in Assam, has been around for more than 500 years, right from the time of the Ahom kingdom.

Some of the oldest trees in India are not even Indian. The extraordinary Baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) has come to India from Africa over the millennia through trade relations, through Ethiopian warlords and later the Europeans. This “tree of life” is present across the country, most notably in Mandu, but nowhere in large numbers. Many of them are known to be nearly a 1,000 years old and one unverified tree in Savanur, Karnataka, has been said to be over 2,000 years old. Baobabs can live to be 2,500 years old.

Climate warriors

Heritage trees “help in better biocontrol of invertebrate pests by acting as large reservoirs of their natural enemies. Older, larger diameter trees sequester massive amounts of carbon compared to smaller trees — underlying their importance in mitigating climate change”, states botanist S. Natesh’s book, *Iconic Trees of India* (Roli Books, 2024), on 75 remarkable trees.

Witness protection programmes needed

Globally, some of the oldest trees known include Methuselah, a more than 4,850-year-old Bristlecone pine in California and Pando, a clonal colony (genetically identical trees connected by one root system) of Quaking Aspens in Utah, the U.S., potentially over 10,000 years old.

How long a tree lives is decided by a combination of inherent and external factors, including genetic makeup, which dictates its potential growth rate and resistance to stressors that enable them to withstand harsh conditions and resist disease, contributing to

India is full of old-growth trees, and the longest-lived ones often are spiritually significant. For long, it was thought that there were no trees in India that were more than a thousand years old, but that may be changing now

long lives. Conversely, fast-growing species are shorter-lived. This is also likely to impact how climate change and related impacts drive tree population and ages across the world.

As a direct result of their long-livedness, many trees alive today have been a silent witness to significant historical, social and ecological events. In the U.S., such trees are identified and listed as ‘Witness Trees’ and receive special protection and preservation under a ‘Witness Tree Protection Program’. This is something India could potentially mimic, considering its extraordinary cultural riches and the speed at which some of them are being lost.

The complexity of the world cannot be understood fully by the limited shapes and lines of our invented geometry. Nature is wrinkled and rumpled, full of rough edges; irregular, yet perfect. Trees are a symbol and a reminder of this and the interconnectedness of all things and need to be revered as such.

The author is a birder and writer based in Chennai.

BINGE WATCH

Chasing eternal sunshine

From debating diets and workout regimens to red light therapy and more, a selection of podcasts and streaming shows

Joe Rogan, one of the biggest podcasters in the world, has been losing steam, by his standards, over the last 12 months or so. In April 2025, however, an episode of *The Joe Rogan Experience* gained the kind of instantly viral traction Rogan regularly commanded in his heyday.

This was his 160-minute interview with biologist and self-styled longevity expert Gary Brecka, whose views on human lifespan have drawn both followers and critics in equal measure. For over two hours, Rogan and Brecka debated diets, workout regimens as well as longevity measures of the more esoteric kind – like red light therapy beds, hyperbaric oxygen chambers and cold plunge tanks.

Brecka’s followers can be seen in the YouTube comments section, citing the benefits of his advice down the years. His critics point out that since he is not a medical doctor, he has no business advising, say, migraine patients or the parents of children with autism (to name just two of Brecka’s pet concerns).

Regardless of where you stand on the specifics, the virality of the episode is a reminder that human longevity is a divisive yet broadly appealing subject, one that makes listeners pay close attention. Look at the popularity of the American neuroscientist and podcaster Andrew Huberman, for instance. Or David Sinclair, whose podcasts, TV specials and appearances in other mainstream media outlets have sent him soaring up the popularity charts. His 2019 book *Lifespan: Why We Age and Why We Don’t Have To*, is a global bestseller, the kind you see all across airport bookshelves. Both Sinclair and Huberman have been featured in Rogan’s podcast these past couple of years.

Into the future

In India, too, the Indian Institute of Science’s ‘Longevity India’ initiative has been hosting the *Biopeak Live* podcast for the last eight months. The episodes are co-hosted by Prof. Deepak Saini, convenor of Longevity India. In their view, ‘healthspan’ is just as important as lifespan – this is the term for the number of healthy years a person gets in their lifetime.

As Prof. Saini outlines in these episodes, the challenge is to conduct both fundamental research into ageing and lifespan, as well as effect change at the policy level in both private and government sectors – so much of one’s lifestyle, after all, is geared around the workplace today.

Air pollution is another issue around which newspaper op-eds and TV debates usually heat up. And longevity is the currency with which impassioned news anchors plead their case to the audience: if you’re living in Delhi, the resultant lung diseases mean you’re shaving five years off your life, and so on. Longevity is both text and subtext in this kind of cultural landscape – it is at once the language through which we describe the future, and the vehicle that can get us there.

Between heaven and hell

No wonder, then, that the world of streaming too has been dotted with stories about transferring consciousness across bodies (*Altered Carbon*), about survivalism (*Silo*, *Fallout*, *The Last of Us*), and about immortal, centuries-old warriors shepherding the course of history (*The Old Guard*).

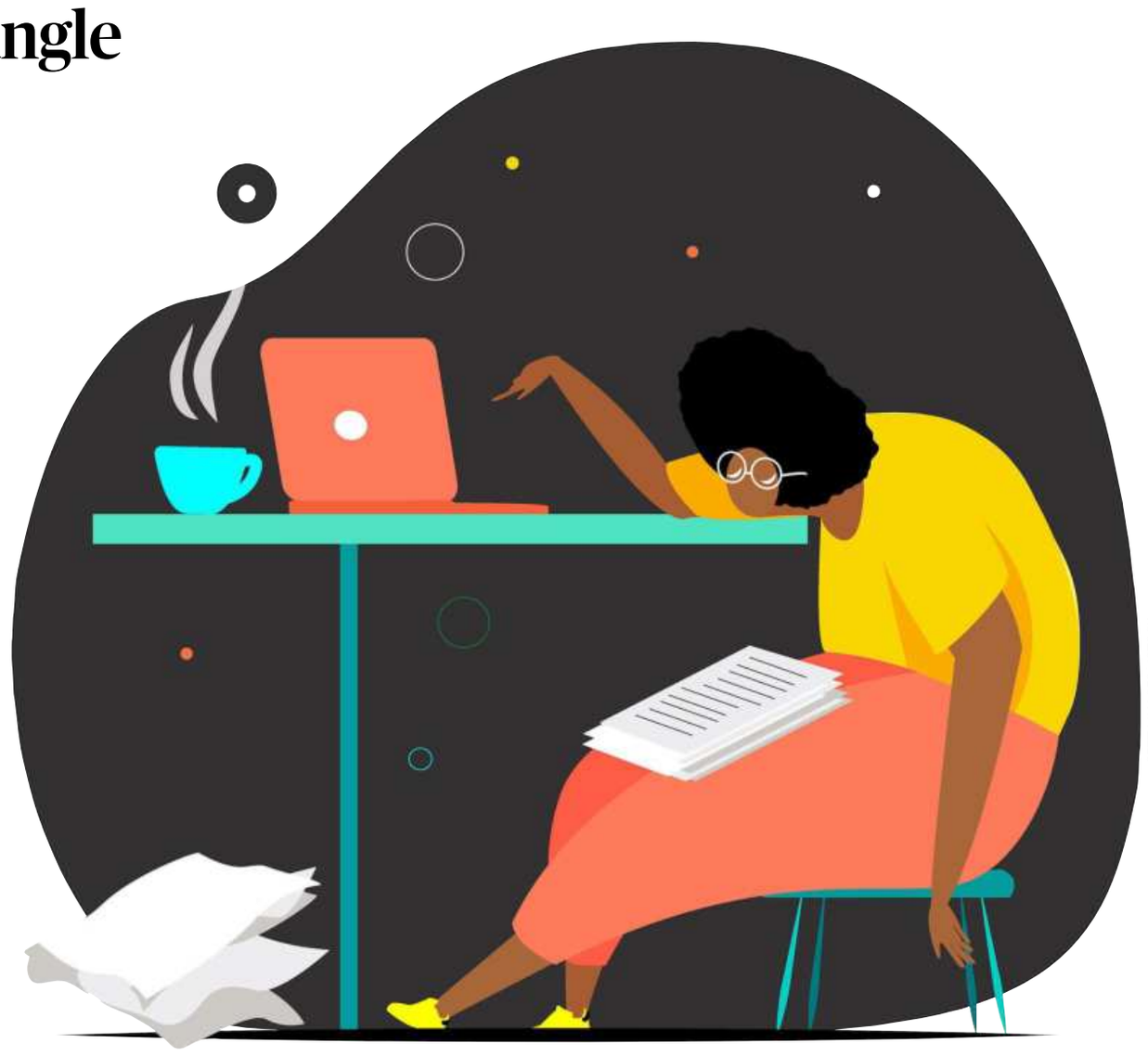
However, the purest expression of the longevity impulse from the streaming world belongs to Amazon Prime Video’s *Upload*, which imagines a kind of digital afterlife wherein wealthy users can transfer their consciousness prior to their physical demise. It is essentially a corporate-designed, novelty resort version of the afterlife, complete with AI servant-bots and the like. There is something innocent and yet very unsettling about its primary-colours vision of ‘forever-fun’ and the show plays around with the concept of eternity quite well – if all you do is your favorite thing 24/7, ‘eternal’ becomes a progressively less attractive prospect over time.

Much like the comedy *The Good Place*, which is set in the literal heaven/hell duality, *Upload* also raises some great philosophical questions around the issue of longevity. For instance, at what point in our lives should we slow down and think dispassionately about the end? How do we prevent well-meaning homilies about ‘living in the moment’ from destroying any semblance of structure in our existence?

And perhaps the most important of them all, how do we give ourselves the best chance of leading a good life, not merely a long one?

***Aditya Mani Jha** is working on his first book of non-fiction.*

Promotional stills from *Upload*, and *The Good Place*, and (left) Prof. Deepak Saini on the *Biopeak Live* podcast.



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 23

PLANNING TO LIVE TO 150?

Imagine doing your taxes and other paperwork for another century

Dear readers, eight years ago, this writer published a novel about a fictional global pandemic. In the novel, a mystery new disease spreads all over the world and starts killing thousands of people. All kinds of shenanigans follow. Politicians who refuse to take it seriously. Riots and civil unrest. Fake news on social media. And eventually, cities go into lockdowns to prevent the disease from ravaging populations.

"Hello Sidin," my editor told me, "I think this is a little too much. Do you really think cities will go into lockdowns? I think all this is highly unbelievable."

As the editors of this newspaper can confirm, I ignored all their feedback and refused to make any changes. The novel was published, and was promptly forgotten by everyone.

And then some years later, when the whole COVID-19 thing happened, the same editor called me up and told me to not write any more books about such things. And this is why I decided to cancel my next novel about a devastating earthquake that destroys all of South India except Thrissur district.

But today, I have decided to make some predictions about the future of human longevity.

The year is 2162. You are celebrating your 183rd birthday with your family and friends in your flat in Navi Navi Navi Mumbai. As you are reading this, you might be thinking: "Imagine how amazing it would be to live to the age of 183!"

Well, have you considered the fact that you know how to cook for nearly 200 people, including your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren and so on? Also, your birthday cake is a 64-kg slab of Black Forest.

But just as you wake up in the morning, you get an email notification that you have 24 hours left to file your Income Tax Returns.

Friends, this is one of the biggest things that longevity fellows overlook: can you imagine filing your income tax returns for 150 years?

Lifespam
/ˈlaɪfspæm/
noun
Definition: The exponentially multiplying burden of administrative tasks, obligations, and mundane responsibilities that accumulate relentlessly over an extended lifespan.
Related forms:
Lifespammed (*adjective*): Overwhelmed by the accumulated administrative burden of extended life.
Lifespamming (*verb*): The process of accumulating endless bureaucratic obligations over decades.

But just as you finish filing your taxes, there is a ring at the door. And there is a young man standing outside: "Hello! This is Padmanabhan!"

You stand there and look at him in bemusement. Because by this point in your life, you know at least 35 Padmanabhans, at least 10 of whom are related to you, and at least four of them are coming to the party. (Obviously, you know around 400 Karthiks.)

"Which Padmanabhan? Please show me some identification?"

He immediately shows you his Aadhaar Biometric Holographic Neural Implant Metaverse Blockchain Card Brought To You By Life Insurance Corporation of India.

Oh yes. Have you considered how many life insurance premiums you have to pay? No?

Padmanabhan then asks you to check your email because he has sent you a very special birthday present. He insists that you check immediately.

You hate it because you are currently on your 57th email account on Gmail (now a division of Adani Industries), plus you have so many Internet accounts that one computer in your house is used solely for the purpose of storing logins and passwords to be used on your other computer.

Padmanabhan, who you still can't fully identify, has purchased an all-expenses paid trip for you to go on holiday to Portugal (also now a division of Adani Industries).

Once again, this Padmanabhan insists that you apply for your visa immediately. So, you open the online form only to be informed that you have to enter your travel history for the last 50 years.

Friends, this is just a short selection of the endless headaches that all of us will have to face if we live for much longer. In fact, I think it is time we come up with a word to describe all the chicaneries we will have to face if we blindly worship at the altar of longevity. And that word is: lifespam.

Example sentence: "By her 160th birthday, the most unbearable lifespam in Ayesha's life was that she had to read the same unbearable columnist in the newspaper from 2025."

Are you planning to live to 150-plus? Have you considered issues such as inflation? Laundry? Shaving? Please share your thoughts in the next two-three years.

Sidin Vadukut *helps early stage companies communicate better. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

A different path

Neither vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a recent team match. South was American expert John McAllister. At the other table, six clubs by North failed by two tricks after a heart lead. The friendly diamond position would give McAllister the tricks he needed, but a diamond finesse through the pre-emptor is not for the weak of heart. McAllister made it without the diamond finesse.

The 10 of spades could have won the first trick, but McAllister won in hand with the ace to preserve an entry to dummy. A club to the king held the trick, so McAllister led a diamond to his ace and another club. East won and led a diamond – another chance for the diamond finesse – but South rose with his king and led a spade to dummy's king, spurning another possible finesse. This was the position [Grid 2]:

	NORTH ♠ K J 10 ♡ 8 5 3 ◇ 3 ♣ K Q J 9 7 6	
WEST ♠ Q 9 8 7 5 3 2 ♡ Void ◇ 10 6 5 ♣ 10 4 2		EAST ♠ 4 ♡ K J 10 9 7 4 2 ◇ Q 7 2 ♣ A 8
	SOUTH ♠ A 6 ♡ A Q 6 ◇ A K J 9 8 4 ♣ 5 3	

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1♣	3♡	4◇	Pass
5♣	Pass	6NT	All pass

Opening lead: Seven of ♠

McAllister ran dummy's clubs. On the last club, East discarded the queen of diamonds to keep his heart stopper. McAllister discarded a low heart, keeping the jack of diamonds, and finally took a finesse – the heart finesse – and claimed his slam when that held the trick. Nicely played!

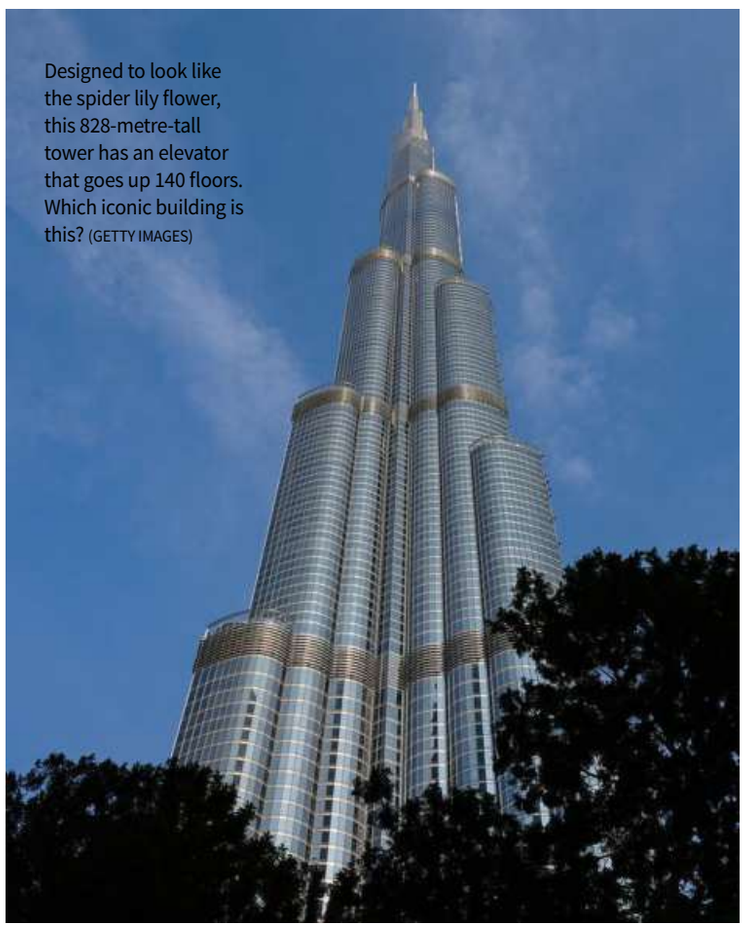
	NORTH ♠ J ♡ 8 5 ◇ Void ♣ J 9 7 6	
WEST ♠ Q 8 7 6 3 ♡ Void ◇ 10 ♣ 10		EAST ♠ Void ♡ K J 10 9 7 4 ◇ Q ♣ Void
	SOUTH ♠ Void ♡ A Q 6 ◇ J 9 8 4 ♣ Void	

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has January 4 ever given us?

Berty Ashley



Designed to look like the spider lily flower, this 828-metre-tall tower has an elevator that goes up 140 floors. Which iconic building is this? (GETTY IMAGES)

1 Born on this date in 1785, Jacob Grimm was a German philologist and mythologist. He and his brother collected a tale that directly addresses the concept of longevity and the stages of life, titled *The Duration of Life*. It is an allegorical narrative that explains why humans live to be approximately 70 years old and the changing nature of life during those years. What series of stories made famous by them features such tales?

2 Born on January 4, 1809, Louis _____ was a French educator who invented a system of communication that has remained unchanged till date. He developed on the already existent 'night writing' used by Napoleon's army. What tactile system, named after him, is being referred to?

3 Born on January 4, 1813, Isaac Pitman was a linguist who, when working as a teacher, spread his motto 'time saved is life gained'. He went on to develop a phonetic system that became the fastest way to capture speech. What is the system named after him?

4 On January 4, 1863, James Plimpton received a patent for his invention in New York. He improved a form of travel by adding two more wheels on each side. This allowed the wearer to steer by simply leaning to the left or right. What had he invented that is still being used on playgrounds?

5 Born on this date in 1900, this ornithologist is probably the longest remembered name in the field. His greatest work was the book 'Birds of the West Indies'. His name, however, inspired an author to write a series of adventure novels while bird watching from an estate called 'Goldeneye'. What was his name?

6 Born on January 4, 1942, John McLaughlin is a jazz fusion guitarist who combined jazz, rock, western classical, Carnatic and Hindustani classical music. He formed the band Shakti with L. Shankar (on violin), Vikku Vinayakram (ghatam), Ramnad Raghavan (mridangam) and one more artist for Hindustani music. Who played the tabla for Shakti?

7 On January 4, 1947, Emilio G. Segrè and Carlo Perrier announced the discovery of technetium, a previously unknown element. It has an extremely long half-life (210,000+ years), making it a significantly long-term radioactive contaminant in nuclear waste. What was special about this element which inspired its name?

8 On January 4, 1958, a team from New Zealand reached the South Pole. They became the first to achieve this overland using motor vehicles and the first since Amundsen in 1911 and Scott in 1912. Who was the leader of this expedition, who, with a Nepali friend, had made history just five years earlier?

9 On January 4, 1959, Mechta (Luna 1) became the first spacecraft to escape Earth's gravity. It was intended to land on the moon and deliver the coat of arms of the country that made it. Due to it missing the target, which now-defunct country lost the opportunity to make a lasting impression?

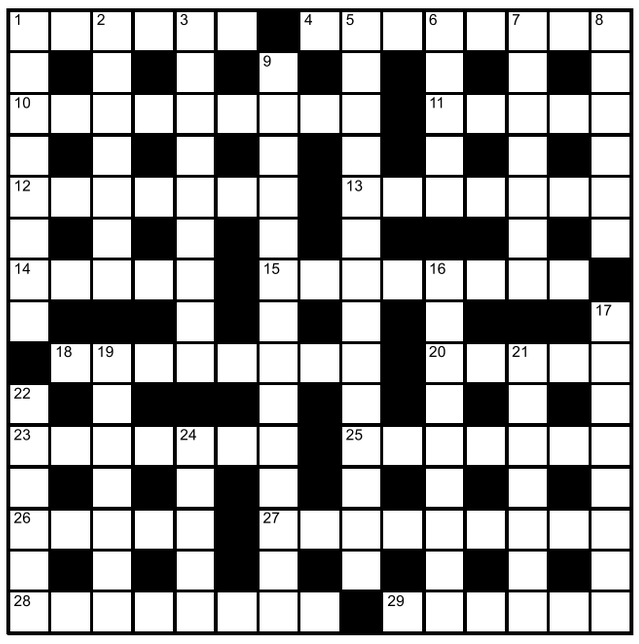
10 On January 4, 2010, this building was opened to the public. Designed to look like the spider lily flower, this 828-metre-tall tower has an elevator that goes up 140 floors. Which iconic building is this?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Fairytales by the Brothers Grimm
2. Braille
3. Shorthand
4. Roller Skates
5. James Bond
6. Ustad Zakir Hussain
7. First artificial element
8. Edmund Hillary
9. USSR
10. The Burj Khalifa

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 37



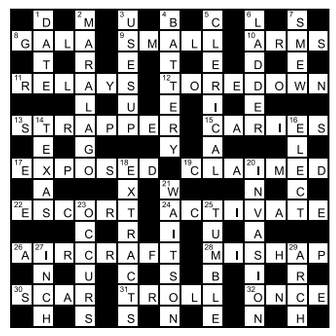
Across

1 Inside the animal enclosure grass is not even (6)
4 Stress over credentials results in disaster (8)
10 The thing about an animal is an ordeal (9)
11 Extremely tidy without an architectural support (5)
12 Issue of a cycling sea cow (7)
13 Investor getting into a hybrid fruit (7)
14 Empower home — that's outstanding (5)
15 Criminal theft — if I can get midway in between first and the hundredth (8)
18 Gold turn over — wire in the middle is so long (2,6)
20 Persuasion for a Scot openly drinking wine (5)
23 Only way to drink tea in the garden (7)
25 Remove — a small doubt expressed (4,3)
26 Fear as Republicans go in late (5)
27 We solve, sure shot (9)
28 It's a headache for Afghan government to cover up (8)
29 Playing fields — Somerset and India picking all sides (6)

Down

1 Lacking enthusiasm to back such type of characters (8)
2 May run aground, be watchful (2,5)
3 After evacuating thrice, four of them have a chat (4-1-4)
5 Maybe refracted, shows a piece of furniture (5,2,7)
6 Glib sense of humour displayed by a dramatist (5)
7 Not even easy to avoid the reversion of property to the state (7)
8 Peak coverage on top of milk shake (6)
9 Cover for retreating enemy — do go around with optimism to the end of Africa (4,2,4,4)
16 Cold supplement after change of hands within (9)
17 Another suspect admitted arson in the centre where oil rigs are found (5,3)
19 Relatively one who's not so tidy (7)
21 Progressed with cycling delegate (7)
22 A question had come up on the seat for a rider (6)
24 German car, zero sound (5)

SOLUTION NO. 36



The heat is rising

Climate change is a strange beast for at least two reasons. The first is, the victim is also the perpetrator; the other is that independent victories do not suggest overall progress

Samir Nazareth
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Vicious cycle Energy-efficient products, electric vehicles, cleaner fuels and the like still need raw materials and production processes to reach consumers which ultimately impacts the climate. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

No one shared congratulatory notes when it was announced that the human race had single-handedly surpassed the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold. Finally, here was undeniable proof that common sense was proverbially not common. Most important, this was the finest example yet of mankind pushing itself to new heights even if it was towards a precipice.

In this period, much was made about renewable energy overtaking coal as the planet's main source of electricity generation. But the race to perdition continues to be powered by fossil fuels.

There could not be greater evidence of this than the large army of lobbyists from the fossil fuel industry who had invaded Brazil at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)'s 30th edition of the Conference of Parties (COP 30) in Belem. There were more than 1,600 lobbyists representing fossil fuel interests. The only national delegation larger was from the host country. But it is not only the industry that is focused on nominating itself for the much-hallowed Darwin Awards; it is also countries and their politicians who wish to win this award for themselves and on behalf of humankind. U.S. President Donald Trump and his "drill baby drill" motto, and the widening gap between net zero by 2050 and the reality in the U.K. are but a few examples of the tragicomic environment humans now inhabit.

But the naysayers are not the only problem. Those focusing on solving the climate issue are part of the problem. It is hard to point out the sheep in wolf's clothing – NGOs funded by industry. But given that the past few COPs have been fossil fuel fests, it is unfortunate that organisations focused on climate and justice and are not fronts for industry continue to participate in the COP and give it credibility. Worse still is the fact that more such organisations are participating in the event.

After the news of the 1.5 degrees Celsius breach, many NGOs responded with messages about not losing heart and continuing the fight at COP30. So, these organisations are burning fossil fuel to participate in an event where they have become inconsequential – as the breach proves. Einstein is reportedly to have observed, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

There is a gargantuan problem, and the first problem is not recognising that the current ecosystem to prevent climate change is not working. Worse still, those that have tried new methods to communicate the existentialist crisis facing humankind, such as Extinction Rebellion, have been ostracised by the old guard. Some organisations have changed tactics reverting to earlier local campaigns focusing on air quality, health and public transportation; these morph into rights and equity. But given the magnitude of the problem, these are like eating soup with a fork.

Has any NGO publicly stated that their endeavours to prevent climate change have fallen short, and therefore they must recalibrate their work?

Has any NGO publicly stated that their endeavours to prevent climate change have fallen short, and therefore they must recalibrate their work? It is no surprise then that their Titanic-like aura and continued emphasis on COP suggest a lack of the much-tom-tommed urgency. Worse still, as the past few COPs have shown, these assemblies have become Trojan Horses for the fossil fuel lobby, which includes many governments.

Climate change is a strange beast for at least two reasons. The first is that the victim is also a perpetrator and, the second is that independent victories do not suggest overall progress on maintaining temperatures below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Ranting against contributors to climate change does not suggest the absence of an individual or organisational carbon footprint. Just work-related energy consumption and day-to-day living ensure one exacerbates the problem. Ultimately, one complains about the higher temperatures and nasty weather that one contributes to.

The same goes for corporations which have signed on to UN development goals. Their manufacturing processes may be cleaner, but their products, packaging, distribution and so on nullify their efforts. Corporates have the privilege of dumping on consumers the cost of the consequences of climate change which they contribute to. Let's not talk about new-age technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain that while being ultra-modern, guzzle energy like vehicles did before the oil crisis.

Energy-efficient products, electric vehicles, cleaner fuels and the like, push the problem further away from our focus. All these still need raw materials, production processes to reach consumers which ultimately impacts the climate. Unsurprisingly, even with these, the temperature threshold was crossed. Things like Earth Hour, the annual event held across the globe when non-essential lights are switched off for an hour, do absolutely nothing to fight climate change. These are just moribund self-congratulatory feel-good occasions. The idea is not to fight the fossil fuel industry but to make them redundant, just as they continue to make the future of mankind superfluous. The goal is to make ourselves lighter on the planet and not just force others to lighten up. In these times of climate change, Mahatma Gandhi's words "be the change you want to see" resonate.

Marketing lesson on the tracks

Hesbul Alom Laskar
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A moving train is a world unto itself. Children see the journey as a chance to enjoy junk food, while others chat with fellow travellers or scroll on their smartphones. There is another group: the sellers who hop on board to offer their goods.

For them, trains are a moving marketplace, serving as a perfect platform to showcase their items. They view it as a spot where customers from different social, cultural, and regional backgrounds come together. This diversity makes it easier to find buyers, as it increases the chances of products getting sold.

Many sellers treat this roving marketplace as an experimental field for their products. A few months ago, while travelling, I met a seller offering his home-grown produce. Asked why he chose trains to sell his produce, he explained that it simplified the selling process, as travellers were often more willing to make a purchase. For some, his products felt unique, since not every region grows the same crops. The train brings people from multiple areas into one space, creating an ideal opportunity. We often see this phenomenon in e-commerce and online marketplaces.

These vendors employ subtle psychological techniques to attract buyers. On another journey, I saw a seller hawking spicy mixed chickpeas, calling out to passengers as he moved through the train. What caught my attention was not just his voice but also his deliberate pause every few steps. Upon closer observation, I realised he was allowing the aroma to spread, drawing people in with the dish's mouthwatering scent. He was leveraging sensory cues to trigger impulse purchases.

New Year, new you? The resolution mirage

Do they work, or are they just a time-honoured tradition? The beauty of resolutions lies not just in making them, but in the hilarious ways they unravel

Y. Mercy Famila
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ISOCK/GETTY IMAGES

As the calendar flips to another year, an odd mix of regret, optimism, and determination strikes many of us. This curious state of mind reminds one of an annual ritual: resolutions. A resolution, by definition, is a firm decision to do or not do something. But when combined with the New Year, it symbolises fresh starts and endless potential. Unfortunately as the sparkle of the New Year fades, so too do many of these resolutions. So, do resolutions work or are they just a time-honoured tradition?

The custom of resolutions is as old as recorded history. The Babylonians are said to have been the first to make them, vowing to return borrowed items and repay debts. In ancient Rome, Julius Caesar introduced January 1 as the start of the year, and people offered resolutions to Janus, the two-faced god. Resolutions today are not about appeasing deities; it is about self-improvement. They symbolise hope, change, and the human desire to strive for better. But while the intent remains noble, the question of effectiveness persists. The journey from resolution to reality is often paved with the laughter of our friends, family, and colleagues.

We link resolutions with the New Year because the dawn of a year is like a clean slate. People envision January 1 as a magical reset button to erase past failures, to rid oneself of bad habits and make a better version of themselves that finally eats healthier, exercises more, and refrains from phone chats. This annual enthusiasm, however, often meets a hilariously untimely demise.

Every year, many of us resolve to cut back on phone usage, promising ourselves to limit screen time and spend more hours on meaningful activities such as reading, exercising, or bonding with family. For the first few days, we stick to it by setting app limits. But later, a quick check on notifications turn into an hour-long scroll, and it becomes too strong to resist. So, the first failed resolution.

Promises to keep

The next New Year vow will be to curb unnecessary spending. However, the first sight of the online mega New Year sale undoes all our planning. Family members tease us asking, "What happened to your no more impulse shopping pledge?", as we unbox our package of things we don't need. Another most popular resolution is to adopt a healthy diet. Downloading calorie-counting apps, people bid adieu to samosas and laddoos. By the second week of January, colleagues notice the silent longing in your eyes as you stare at the canteen snacks counter. In a mocking concern, they ask you, "No more samosa, today?" Someone offers a slice of a birthday cake, and the rest is history.

This year, I resolve to write at least two research articles. Of course, this resolution comes with its challenges: finding quiet, focused hours amid lectures, meetings, and grading. Can I achieve this? I have to wait and watch. The beauty of resolutions lies not just in making them, but in the hilarious ways they unravel. Family, friends, and colleagues are often the first to point out our lapses, turning our grand plans into moments of laughter.

Studies often suggest that 80% of resolutions are abandoned by February. Many abandon their goals after one slip-up, thinking they have failed completely. Even if resolutions don't lead to lasting change, they are not entirely pointless. The process of making them encourages introspection. It makes us pause, assess our lives, and identify what truly matters. Resolutions symbolise renewal. They give us a reason to pause, dream, and strive. Whether or not we achieve them, they remind us of our potential and the endless opportunities a New Year brings.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Many influencers have reshaped India's art landscape by amplifying voices showcased at platforms like the India Art Fair and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. ('They set the tone'; Dec. 28) By promoting artists, galleries, and exhibitions digitally, they connect tradition with global audiences. Their influence helps democratise art, nurture emerging talent, and strengthen India's cultural presence worldwide.
N.S. Reddy

It is important to note that art and design as a form of expression have existed since ancient times. The main changes today are the mediums, platforms for visibility, and discussion frameworks.
Sajna Hameed

Happy reading

I found the selection of non-fiction titles incredibly useful. ('Best books of 2025'; Dec. 28) Having these books recommended through the views of eminent personalities adds a layer of trust and depth to the curation.
N. Prabhakaran

The list is thoughtful and wide-ranging, but it also highlights a concern: many good books struggle to reach ordinary readers. Public libraries need regular updates, regional book fairs need support, and schools should be encouraged to host reading circles.
M. Barathi

In solidarity

For a country whose statehood is yet to be recognised and which has been ravaged by continuous conflict, it is heartwarming to see auteurs exhibiting courage and conviction in depicting Palestine on screen. ('Breakout year for Palestine films'; Dec. 28) These films are sure to make a strong impact on the international film firmament.
C.V. Aravind

Being Indian

G. Sampath's satire is sharp and unsettling, but it also points to a deeper concern: resilience should not become a substitute for reform. ('Congrats, you are now Viksit'; Dec. 28) Endurance cannot excuse weak safety nets or poor governance.
S.M. Jeeva

Grandeur of history

Carved from living rock, Ellora still speaks of faith, skill, and time. ('Ellora deserves better'; Dec. 28) Yet the path to it is uneven, the welcome uncertain. Silence replaces guidance, dust gathers where care should stand. The need is simple, not grand: clean paths, clear signs, trained voices to tell its story, and transport that respects both visitor and village. Let attention be steady, not seasonal.
A. Myilsami

Circus of life

The article is very appropriate for the times we live in. ('Of gods and potatoes'; Dec. 28) Saba's Phuphee has nailed it yet again. The circus that is going on, in the name of religion, in most parts of South Asia simply makes no sense. The only possible explanation, if at all there is one, is dirty politics.
Deepak Taak

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Winter blooms that keep Nilgiris alive
They are extremely beautiful to behold, with flowers varying from white to red, blue and yellow
Yukesh Saravanan

Goodbye congestion
Accept permanent gridlock as the cost of growth, or adopt the solutions the world has already shown to work
Nidheesh Jain

When the tongue forgets its way home
The earth still whispers in the languages one no longer remembers how to answer
Adyasakti Maharana

The importance of leaving home
A girl deserves to go out into the world for her education or work to find herself
Adithi A.

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THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, January 4, 2026

NEEDS INTERVENTION
"The Massano De Amorim building in Panjim. Built around a large open ground, it needs urgent restoration as much for its architectural character as for its importance to the streetscape."

'See modern heritage as meaningful'

Raya Shankhwalker | Goa

Recent project: Conservation and adaptive reuse of a Franco-Tamil villa in Puducherry, "re-establishing its relationship with the street, and setting a precedent that could encourage neighbouring owners to follow suit".

Urban conservation rarely advances on expertise alone. It requires public pressure. Shankhwalker, known for his work in Goa and his role in heritage advocacy, emphasises that legislation often follows activism, not the other way around. Cities like Panjim benefited from early designation of conservation zones, but many Indian towns still lack basic frameworks to protect even significant modern heritage.
"The recognition of Mumbai's Art Deco precinct as a UNESCO World Heritage Site marked a shift not because the buildings were ancient, but because they forced a rethinking of value," he says. "Modern heritage — cinemas, apartment blocks, civic buildings — does not wear the aura of antiquity. Its survival depends on people learning to see it as meaningful."
Small interventions can have a disproportionate impact. A restored rice mill in Morjim, completed in 2024, exemplifies this approach. Originally built in the 1950s, the mill has been adaptively reused as a café-bar, with its architectural elements carefully restored. Glass inserts in the Mangalore-tiled roof allow natural light to filter in; everyday objects from the mill's past have been repurposed as elements of décor. Now functioning as a café and jazz venue, it demonstrates how a modest structure can retain its spatial essence while becoming a contemporary gathering place.

'Family homes carry cultural value, too'

Aishwarya Tipnis | New Delhi

Recent project: Conservation-led master plan for The Lawrence School, Sanawar, a historic hill-campus where heritage buildings, landscapes, and everyday student life are being treated as a continuous living system.

Once conservation moves beyond monuments, uncomfortable questions surface. Whose history is deemed worthy of protection? Who has access to conserved spaces? Who pays for upkeep — and who benefits from a building's renewed visibility?
Tipnis, whose work often focuses on domestic and everyday heritage, argues that "heritage should not be restricted to royal lineages" or grand narratives.
"Everyone has heritage," she insists. "A middle-class family home, altered over generations, carries cultural value, too."
The problem is not lack of attachment — most people want to keep what they inherit — but lack of resources, time and guidance.
Her approach emphasises care on an intimate scale. In projects such as the careful repair of a modest house in Old Delhi, working within tight budgets and with fragile Mughal-era bricks, Tipnis' intervention is deliberately restrained. Cracks are stabilised, materials respected, and contemporary needs accommodated without visual drama. "When my design is invisible, conservation has succeeded," she says.

NEEDS INTERVENTION
Siliguri Town Station, which is a starting point for the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. "It's dilapidated and abandoned, and actually a UNESCO World Heritage Site."

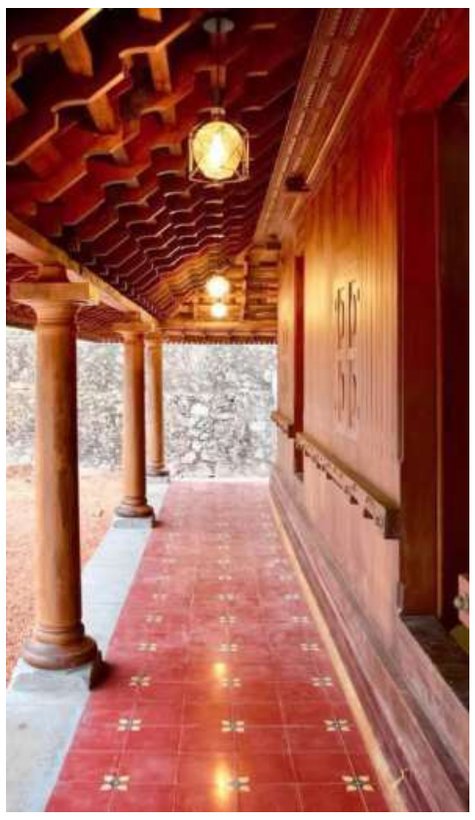
KEEPING BUILDINGS ALIVE

Conservation is not about saving the past, say leading architects. It is about learning how to live with time

Aastha D.

Buildings age the way cultures do: unevenly, politically, selectively. And cultures do not endure by clinging to form, but by carrying forward the spirit. Few practices make this distinction as tangible as conservation architecture. At its best, conservation is not about embalming buildings or sealing them off as relics. It is about keeping structures alive – socially, materially, and culturally – while acknowledging that time leaves marks, and that those marks matter.

In India, where cities grow as much by erasure as by expansion, conservation architecture sits at an uneasy crossroads. It is often reduced to sentiment, nostalgia, or elite indulgence. But speak to practitioners working in this field, and a different picture emerges: conservation as a way of thinking about continuity, repair, labour, and responsibility. Less about freezing history, more about negotiating with it.



NEEDS INTERVENTION
"I'd like to see ordinary old buildings being conserved for the future. I have seen so many disappear in Mylapore and George Town in Chennai."

'Tap into India's living craft tradition'

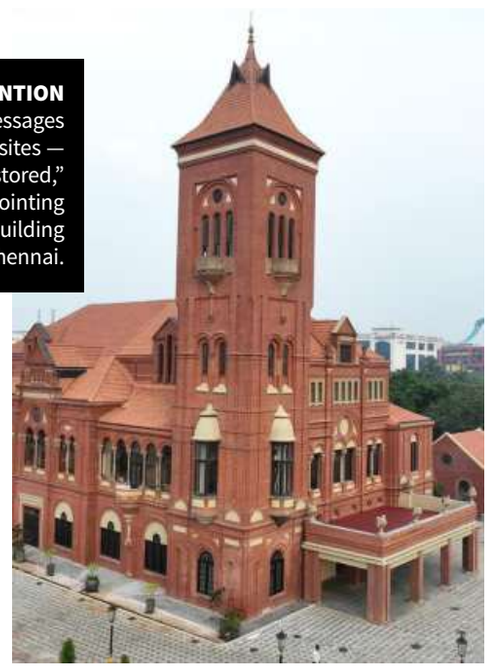
Benny Kuriakose | Chennai

Recent project: An over-200-year-old property in Ayyavandlapalle village, Andhra Pradesh, that's "an interesting case study of a person restoring a jointly owned ancestral house with a 'first right to buy' option — a good model for heritage houses in places like Chettinad".

For Kuriakose, whose practice draws deeply from vernacular traditions and the legacy of architect Laurie Baker, conservation is inseparable from living systems. Vernacular buildings were never meant to last untouched for centuries; they were designed to be repaired, altered, and rebuilt. That cyclical understanding of time challenges modern obsessions with permanence and novelty.
"India still has a living craft tradition — masons, carpenters, tile-makers — whose knowledge is embodied rather than codified," he says. "Conservation that relies solely on imported materials or technological fixes sidelines this intelligence." Kuriakose's work prioritises principles over style: climate responsiveness, local materials, skilled labour, and human comfort, while remaining pragmatic about contemporary needs.
His work also reframes sustainability, and justice. Paying craftspeople fairly, and valuing how something is done rather than how quickly it is completed.

The essayist-educator writes on culture, and is founding editor of Proseterity *– a literary arts magazine.*

NEEDS INTERVENTION
She often receives messages suggesting future sites — "building waiting to be restored," as one message put it, pointing to the Bharat Insurance Building on Mount Road in Chennai.



'Buildings cannot survive as static objects'

Abha Narain Lambah | Mumbai

Recent project: Restoration of Victoria Public Hall in Chennai, reimagining the 19th-century landmark as a public museum and cultural space.

Some structures are celebrated, restored; others are left to crumble quietly. Lambah, who has worked across monumental heritage and dense urban precincts for over three decades, recalls that when she began her practice in the mid-90s, conservation in India was narrowly focused on a small, official list of monuments protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act. Streets, markets, neighbourhoods, vernacular buildings — the everyday fabric of cities — simply did not count.
That absence shaped her approach early on. "Conservation," she argues, "cannot be limited to isolated buildings standing apart from social life. It must be understood as an urban, lived, and collective practice." One of her earliest projects on Dadabhai Naoroji Road in Mumbai illustrates this ethos. Rather than treating the historic arterial street as a government-led beautification exercise, she worked directly with shopkeepers and residents, showing up week after week, talking through facades, materials, and identity. Over time, trust replaced suspicion. Eventually, 75 shopkeepers contributed from their own pockets towards restoring cobblestones, signage, and street character. This idea, that time must be worked with, not erased, is foundational.

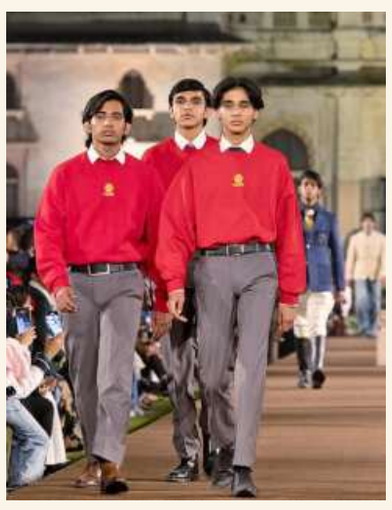
Rkive and the art of repair

With a new shop in Mumbai, Ritwik Khanna is gamifying the concept of recycling clothes

Vinita Makhija

In the last week of December, Perry Cross Road in Mumbai's Bandra suburb, which has hosted streetwear favourites such as Jaywalking and Mainstreet Marketplace, will also become home to New Delhi-based circular fashion label Rkive City's next experiment: a 400 sq.ft. repair shop. A new format called Rkivecity outpost no. 1, it is visualised as a travelling pop-up, with a repair lab, a curation of old books, objects records, and jeans, among others.

It is a wild step for a young brand, but not for Ritwik Khanna. All of 26, energetic, carrying the sort of undaunted, reckless optimism that powers start-ups and late night sewing rooms, Khanna says, "It may not make sense financially to repair other people's clothes, but it's not a marketing activity either." He is calling it an impact play. A kind of designer-led CSR where instead of discarding their beloved or not-so-beloved clothes, people can reimagine what they were ready to bin. "We want to gamify the concept of repairing, where you can get your frayed pieces patched or fixed, with a cool contemporary play on it."



Outfits from discarded linens and old uniforms at Mayo College; (below) Ritwik Khanna. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Love me again
Repairing or *rafoogari* is not new in Indian parlance. Patchwork, quilting, *kantha*, darning, even Japanese boro that conscious labels such as Studio Medium and Padmaja propagate follow the same zero-waste instinct, where torn or roughed up pieces earn second lives with more character than the first.

But what does a designer repair shop charge? Khanna laughs at the question and then answers it seriously: "We are not going to be functionally the biggest repair store in the country. That is still someone like the tailor uncle who sits close to Galleries Lafayette [in Kala Ghoda] and is capable of repairing anything. But it will reflect a designer intervention." And with that, a higher price point. Not for mending, but for recontextualising.

Khanna is aware that in India repair has always been tied to lack. "Someone who worked at OLX explained to me that the way Indians need to be marketed second lives is not with the shame of buying pre-owned but by encouraging selling." This small insight sits alongside the mountains of post-consumer textiles he has accumulated. Together, they form the beginnings of a new system.
"Circular Design Challenge at Lakme Fashion Week [India's biggest award for circular fashion, which he won last year] gave me a platform, but I do believe we will see de-institutionalisation of brands moving away from fashion week formats," he says.

For a young designer to show confidence outside the system reveals where their minds are now. It mirrors a generational shift, too. While Millennial designers once chased international runways and couture conquests, the younger lot really does want to save the world, but not by stopping people from buying clothes. Instead they want to build parallel worlds, ones that make clothes last longer, and loop back.

The writer is a Mumbai-based fashion stylist.

Rebuilding through cuts and patterns

Khanna, who comes from a family of clothing exporters, faced resistance when he refused to join the business. "I told them I would work in the clothing market but in my own way." He now works with his 21-year-old brother Aarav, collecting discarded clothing bits and seeing them in a completely different light. "As impossible as it may seem I've put certain codes in place for how we want to arrange the discarded bits, colours, materials." Rkive City, the brand they co-own, often posts images of their mountainous collections of degenerated clothing, pieces they later pull apart and rebuild.
Khanna also carried this energy into the night of his first solo show recently at his old stomping grounds in Mayo College Ajmer. His cast included former teachers, young models and current students.

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